

Letters from Kathmandu

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Export Commodities: Trafficking from Nepal to India

In this newsletter, we report about trafficking of children from Nepal to India. Trafficking in human beings is not confined to sexual exploitation only, but there is an overwhelming emphasis on trafficking for the sex industry.

Over the past ten years, trafficking in human beings has reached epidemic proportions. Pino Arlacchi from the UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention said recently that during the last four hundred years about 11.5 million Africans were trafficked into slavery, while in the last decade alone, more than 30 million women and children may have been trafficked within and from Southeast and South Asia for sexual purposes and sweatshop labor.

According to UNICEF and also to recent US government statistics, between 800,000 and 900,000 people are trafficked annually across international borders. In addition, it is feared that mainly in Africa and Latin America hundreds of thousands of people, primarily children, are trafficked within their own countries, primarily for all forms of child labour.

In Nepal the office of ILO/IPEC estimates that around 12,000 children are trafficked annually from the country. But reliable data for Nepal on trafficked women and children, their places of origin and destination of trafficking are difficult. Removed from public view and behind the doors of brothels, factories, deserted shops, in cars and trucks, in backyard enterprises and even in family homes, the children who are trafficked and exploited are hidden away so that they can be exploited.



"Nepali village girls, such as this, are potential victims of trafficking. In many rural communities surrounding the capital city of Kathmandu, families have been sending their children to Indian brothels for several generations" (Fallen Angels).

In the deuki system of western Nepal, poor children are purchased by prosperous families and offered to temples in exchange for the deity's boon of more prosperity. In theory, the purchaser is to care for the child. In practice, she becomes a temple prostitute. As she is dedicated to the goddess, she cannot marry, nor would anyone marry her daughters. In a vicious cycle, these daughters are available to be bought and dedicated to the temple. At times the priests of the temple go on pilgrimage to India, taking the "temple maidens" with them, both for their own pleasure and to earn a bit of hard cash along the way. The families themselves often must rely on participating in migrant agricultural labor in other parts of Nepal and in India. At those times, the women and young girls earn also by selling their sexual services.

© Photo Thomas Kelly

Trafficking on the Subcontinent: Nepal and India

In the family business

In Chautara, a Tamang village north of the Kathmandu Valley, Bhim Tamang is a relatively wealthy man. His cottage is roofed with tin, and his son's motorcycle is parked outside, next to the buffalo shed. Although he has no electricity, a television stands in the corner of the room, covered with cloth.

'We will have electricity here in a few months,' he says. Bhim's prosperity is a result of his fortune to have fathered four daughters. Three are working in the brothels of Mumbai. The fourth, age 12, will go next year.



These Nepali "madams," or brothel managers, had been identified by some rescued girls. They have been implicated in not only managing the brothels but also in actively recruiting girls. They sit here facing the girls they once controlled. Some of the managers were victims themselves, servicing clients during their younger years and ascending the ranks as they grew too old to attract customers. © Photo Thomas Kelly

"Gurung and Magar families send their sons to the army. Their sons send money home. Why shouldn't we send our daughters to help us?"

Bhim's sister-in-law concurs. 'Look at Kamala, our neighbour. She went to Mumbai years ago. She helped her family. Now she's returned: she's brought gold, she paid for a water system for the houses on our hill. We are poor people here. We can't grow enough food; the government doesn't help us. We must depend on our daughters and sisters.'

Each year, thousands of women and girls migrate from Nepal to work in the brothels of India. Some are abducted, some are duped into marriage and sold, others go to support their families. On one hillside in Nepal, a visiting journalist recently calculated that five 'impoverished' villages receive an annual income of 2.5million rupees (US\$ 37,000) from the earnings of their women and



Krishna Pariyar, in blue shirt, and two of his accomplices were convicted of trafficking underage Nepali girls to Mumbai. Krishna was located and arrested when his wife told local authorities of his location, after her rescue from a brothel. He had sold his wife and her sister and his son was consequently born in a Mumbai brothel. © Photo Thomas Kelly

girls in Mumbai. While an increasing number of girls are from urban areas, the majority still come from rural villages scattered throughout the country.

Until the last decade, the majority of girl trafficking from Nepal to India was confined to several districts surrounding the Kathmandu Valley and small areas along the Indian border. Most Nepali females in the brothels of Mumbai were from the Tamang ethnic group. Today, the ethnic and regional composition of working women and girls is changing. Field observers have noticed a much wider range of Nepali ethnicities in Indian brothel districts.

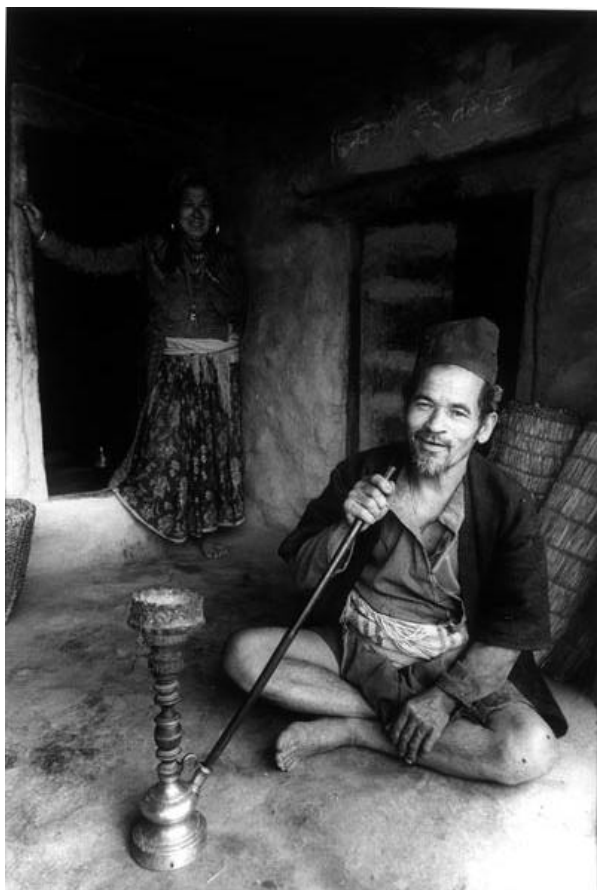
The export of girls from Nepal is not a new phenomenon: its methods have been proven and some participants have been involved in the business since it took its modern form approximately 35 years ago.

In the early 1960s, Indian cities entered the post-Independence phase of modernisation and urban expansion. This period roughly coincided with the



These women were arrested for the alleged trafficking of Nepali girls to Mumbai. They are being interrogated at the Hanuman Dhoka Jail in Kathmandu. © Photo Thomas Kelly

advent of South Asia's cold war. In response to a perceived threat from China, India militarised its northern borders, building roads to provide access. *Tekhadars*, or labour agents, drew many Nepali labourers out of the hills. They also recruited women, the majority, Tamang, Rai and Limbu, to service the labourers and the army. When India's urban expansion began, the *tekhadars* modified their strategies to fill the needs of the village men working in the cities. Thus began Nepal's most lucrative export industry: the shipment of its girls to India.



At the time of this photo, this couple in Sindhupalchowk District had sold 2 of their 5 daughters to traffickers. Due to a variety of factors, the girl-child has little or no status in most parts of Nepal. She is only an extra mouth to feed and will cost money to marry off. This father compared selling his daughter to the brothel to a young man going off to join the army. When a social worker threatened to send the police after them for selling their daughters, this couple just laughed. © Photo Thomas Kelly

Today, trafficking is an established business in the Tamang districts of Sindhupalchowk, Nuwakot and Kabre Palanchowk. Although the Nepal government, the media and most Nepali NGOs still characterise all traffickers as villains who steal the innocent from the hills through guile or force, in these districts most of the 'traffickers' are merely village men, women and boys. They are frequently amateurs, acting as middlemen or as



Many of Nepal's truck stop sex workers operate their own tea stalls, from which they sell sex to passing truck and bus drivers. Some have been forced into the profession by traffickers or pimps; others have been forced by economic or social conditions, such as those created by being abandoned by a husband.

© Photo Mani Lama

'mules' to transport the girls to India. They often enter trafficking for the same reasons that families sell their girls-to escape a dead-end life of work and poverty. They willingly give up lives of hard labour and enter the sex trade, transporting a girl now and then for easy living, motorcycles and televisions.

In many villages whose girls are regularly sent to the brothels, there is a 'matchmaker', a village resident who acts as an intermediary for the buyer in India. Often a woman, the matchmaker's job is to seek out a girl with beauty and youth-one for whom the brothel owner will pay a good price-and convince the family to sell her. She visits the girl's home to soften the family's fears, describing the good life their daughter will have and the wealth she will send home.



The daughter of a sex worker receives comfort and care at a hostel for the children of sex workers. The majority of sex workers have children. After addressing the pressures of harassment and immediate economic security, the sex workers have voiced strong concern for the welfare of their children. Establishing a safe and healthy environment for their children is one step in creating an atmosphere of human dignity for both mother and child. © Photo Achinto

Poverty lowers the resistance of village people to the entry of their daughters into sex work. In the impacted district of Sindhupalchowk, only five per cent of the land is fit for cultivation and excessive population has strained all resources—cultivable land, water and firewood. Farm work is seasonal, and men and boys earn extra income from portering, if work is available. The pressures of poverty fall heavy upon the children, and heaviest upon the girls.

Village employment cannot match the wealth offered by the sex industry. This, more than any other factor, frustrates preventive programmes. A family can sell their daughter for more money than they could make in five years, and can often expect a regular income from her labour. When they are hungry, it is difficult to resist.

Their resistance is further lowered when they see the wealth of those around them—other villagers who have profited from the sale of their girls. In the high-transportation areas, many of the houses have new tin roofs and plate glass windows; inside are new pressure cookers, radios and cassette players. The comparative prosperity of their neighbours, coupled with tales of girls' success in India, easily convince villagers to send their daughters away.

Today, the majority of NGO interventions, supported, by bags of donor funds, are directed at the few 'danger districts' surrounding the Kathmandu Valley. These interventions are designed on the premise that the girls are duped or forcibly abducted into prostitution, and that their families are passive innocents. Until very recently, NGOs and donors have ignored the obvious: that the 'danger districts' cannot possibly supply the vast number of Nepali females that fill the brothels of India, and that villagers whose girls and women have worked in Indian brothels for 30 years are not likely to be terribly naive about what is going on. *By John Frederick – From: Fallen Angels: The Sex Workers of South Asia Delhi, India: Roli Books, 2000*

Life is a circus for some Nepali children

Parents are selling children to circuses in India where they become the act themselves

The rescue of 29 Nepali children working for the Great Indian Circus in Kerala on 17 April has highlighted the work child rights activists are doing to stop the exploitation. But for many other Nepali children, the circus still represents one of the only ways out of extreme poverty. Instead of

being taken by parents to see cavorting acrobats, some children are forced to travel to circuses in India where they are abandoned by their parents or agents to become the acts themselves.



A girl dangles from the mouth of an elephant at the Asiad Circus in Bhopal. © Photo Robbie Cooper

Until January this year, Santosh, who looks wiser than his 12 years, worked as a clown in the Great Bombay Circus, making other children laugh. He had been there since the age of five when his Nepali father sold him to an agent. As the circus travelled to towns all over India, Santosh lived in a basic tent with male artistes of all ages. His day started at 5AM with training, followed by three shows of three hours every day. Exhausted, he would clamber into bed at midnight. Spending time with his sisters who had joined the company five years before him was forbidden.

Thanks to the Esther Benjamins Trust (EBT), a UK-based charity that works exclusively for children in Nepal, Santosh is now back home. After a medical examination at the trust's refuge in Bhairawa, he was reunited with his parents who are now aware of the dangers present in circuses. As he began his 24-hour journey home by train



A child contortionist from Nepal. © Photo Robbie Cooper

from Old Delhi Railway Station with EBT volunteers, his eyes lit up when I asked him about plans for the future. He hoped to start school by the end of the month, and he wants to be a pilot when he grows up.

There are currently over 250 Nepali children working in circuses in India, over 80 percent of them female. Their fair complexion and Mongoloid features make them an exotic lure for Indian audiences, as does their renowned flexibility. The fact that they are Nepali makes them vulnerable: they are not legally India's problem. Children are sold to circuses for as little as Rs 2,000 and forced to work for Rs 256 per week, if they get paid at all.



A young clown prepares for the show. © Malika Browne

Reports of sexual abuse and even rape in circuses are rife. Young girls aged between 14 and 16 may be forced to 'entertain' the circus owner and his sons. There are few safety precautions in the ring, and regular injuries from accidents are left untreated. The nomadic nature of circuses means the children are prevented from going to school, and are instead thrust into the university of life.

Two recent developments in India have contributed to an increase in recruitment of circus children from Nepal. In the early 1990s, the success of the literacy campaign in Kerala, where circus performers were traditionally from, has meant that fewer Keralites are willing to join circuses. And lobbying by animal rights activists in India has made it illegal for wild animals to be used in shows (although elephants still count as domestic animals), leaving huge gaps in the circuses' repertoire.

I visited two Indian circuses anonymously in January, the Asiad Circus in Bhopal and the Empire Circus in Bombay. The latter, which bills

itself enigmatically as 'An Exploring Exposition of Enthrilli Shows by Indian expertise' (sic) was a sad three-hour marathon of tired acts in which the children's revealing gold-sequined costumes were held together by safety pins. Not a single child smiled during the three hour show I endured. It was payday and the festival of Eid when I visited, so at least the Empire played to a full house.

The Asiad Circus in Bhopal, in contrast, squeezed out three shows a day to an audience of about thirty farm labourers. Both circuses were run by men with huge curling moustaches who, after initial suspicion, gave me their business cards, which read 'Impresario'. They both admitted that satellite television and cinema were affecting audience numbers, but both denied that any of the children in their troupe were either Nepali or unaccompanied by parents.

Last year, EBT conducted an undercover six-month survey of 22 circuses around India and appealed to India's 30 main circuses to release the children they had bound to illegal contracts. The result was slight, yet encouraging: in January, three circuses travelled vast distances across India to the capital and handed over a total of nine children to the charity. The raid two weeks ago by child rights groups was more confrontational, the second phase of the campaign to repatriate Nepali children from circuses that refused to cooperate. EBT believes that its role is not only to retrieve the children from the circuses, but also to rehabilitate them within society, preparing them for a return to school or, in the case of the older children, for work.

One of the staff members at the ETB refuge, 17-year-old Maya, smiles broadly as she teaches basket-weaving and other marketable skills for teenage girls. But behind Maya's smile are four years of pain when she worked as a circus performer. During that time she personally witnessed a fellow performer being beaten to death for the 'crime' of fainting from hunger. She feels able to talk about what she has seen, but many others choose to remain silent. *By Malika Brown; Nepali Times # 194; 30 April – 6 May 2004. Courtesy of Nepali Times*

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